

# A Grateful Heart AT Christmas





That the generous gifts  
of God to you  
may give you new reason for  
a grateful heart  
at Christmas  
is the prayerful wish of

Me C.

See you on the  
10th ✓ ✓ ✓

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# *A Grateful Heart at Christmas*

By DANIEL A. LORD, S. J.

AS THE first snowfall drops white, silent, and peaceful over the country, it brings with it the immediate and urgent thought of Christmas.

Like an especially bright and shining coin, that first thought has two sides. On one side of our Christmas coin the inscription reads: "What shall we be getting for Christmas?" But the other, the side we hold up longest in our palm, is the one that we consider more seriously. Indeed we should be proud if anyone looking over our shoulder saw what we were reading. For on this side is inscribed: "What shall we give for Christmas?"

When we were very little children, we thought only of the getting side of our Christmas coin. Indeed the coin of childhood often seemed to have only that one side.

Now that we are adults, we have the certainty that the child is grow-

ing up when he—or that precious little she—starts to plan ahead not merely for the gifts he will get but for the gifts he will give. When from kindergarten he proudly brings home that atrocious, hand-fashioned, crayon-scrawled Christmas card and ostentatiously secrets it in anticipation of dad's Christmas, we know that the child has reached one of the turning points in life. Now at last he is a little man, she a little woman.

FOR among us adults who are worthy of our maturity, precious as are the gifts we get, far more important are the gifts we give. The store windows do not flaunt their enticing Christmas gifts in any mistaken hope that we will be prompted to dash in and buy ourselves something to stuff in our own Christmas stockings. The shrewd store proprietors and the skilled window dressers do not waste their time trying to whet our wistful greed. We do not press mature noses against the window and say, "If I think hard enough about that beautiful thing, maybe Aunt Annie will buy it for me." . . . "I'll try thought trans-

ference on my best beau until he realizes that I will not be completely happy unless he mortgages a month's lunches to buy me that."

Oh indeed we all have our hours of Christmas window-shopping. We may quite honestly—if hopelessly—wish that there were fairy godmothers who could turn our instinctive desires into miraculous realities. How wonderful if such a generous figure from fairyland could stand in the center of our Christmas hearth and scatter about the family rug that mink, those diamond clips, that overcoat from Bond Street, that comfortable living-room suite, that bookcase filled with beloved books, that magnum of vintage champagne.

But most frequently when we stand before the window that has been dressed with all the gaiety of Christmas, we are mentally sorting out the gifts we must give to others. We are stacking up our generosity against our bank account and wishing that our power to write checks were as vast as our desire to give to others.

"There is just the tie that matches Jim's eyes."

"Helen would look perfect in that house coat."

"I think I can afford that bicycle for Bill."

"Isn't that precisely the pair of figure skates for which Beatrice has been sighing?"

"I can just see grandmother relaxing in that comfortable chair."

"Think how mother's work would be cut down if I could only get her that marvelous gadget."

"She" (and for once the personal pronoun needs no explanation) "deserves just such a gift, and I must get it for her before someone else sneaks it for a less worthy she."

"He" (and there is no need further to identify the person) "would probably be as happy as I should want him to be if I gave him just that."

**H**APPILY for the human race one season of the year finds us all altruistic. Altruistic is a stuffy and a stiffish word; but we know that it is backed with meaning, lovely thoughtfulness of others.

For that one day, Christmas, we count our gifts to others long before



we count the gifts to ourselves. We wax prodigal in the making of our shopping list and extravagant of our bank accounts before we have a chance to grow complacent over the gifts that will make our own life more comfortable or to sit down to figure in blissful content just how mother or dad or Uncle Bill or Cousin Sarah or he or she—or any of those other friends and relatives—could have been so prodigal and extravagant in our regard.

**O**FTEN enough in the course of our lives we are able to prove by experiment the truth of Christ's lovely teachings. And Christmas is the happy season when we learn again and again from experimental fact that it is more blessed to give than to receive.

Indeed it is the one season of the year when we demonstrate to clinching conclusion that if we do not blessedly give we stand only the faintest chance of happily receiving.

We have but a scant record of Mr. Scrooge's private life prior to that

miraculous Christmas. But none of us believes that the old skinflint ever woke of a Christmas morning to find the hearth covered with the gifts of devoted relatives, adoring employees, and admiring friends. If there was anything in Mr. Scrooge's stocking, it was undarned holes.

The village miser is not likely to be pestered by expressmen bearing gifts gay with ribbons and topped with holly. The mean stepmothers of the fairy tales (and, thank heaven, they seem to be a race long banished; for the stepmothers I have known have been thoroughly charming and generous women) never found their stepdaughters running to their rooms of a Christmas morning to bury them under an avalanche of holiday bundles. Though the stepdaughters of the fairy tales were the world's most patient, forgiving, and affectionate of children, even the writers of fairy tales did not ask us to push our credulity to the point where we would believe that they overwhelmed their stepmothers with Christmas gifts.

THE dear Lord was divinely wise and humanly shrewd when He left for us that often-quoted gem of wisdom, "It is a more blessed thing to give, rather than to receive." Saint Paul reverts to it with experienced approval.

Yet out of his wise old pagan head Benjamin Franklin might easily have coined a phrase like it for his almanac. Not only is it more blessed to give than to receive. It is more humane; it is sensible; indeed it is very farsighted and provident of our own welfare.

We have all learned from personal experience that we always receive just a few less letters than we write. Letterless is the silly soul who lives by the chestnut, "I like to get letters, but I don't like to write them." Come to think of it, a letter is a kind of gift. So in the epistolary line too we get what we give. We are written to by those to whom we have written, or we get letters from those who with some degree of hope expect a letter from us in response to their letter to us.

SO IT is with all gifts.

We quickly grow tired of giving to people who never give to us, just as we grow very tired of entertaining at dinner a person who never invites us to dine at his house or who in a restaurant always manages to let the check slip through his fingers and into ours.

We give to little children and feel compensated when their only return is a quick, moist kiss. Indeed we feel repaid in our own joy over the fun they are having with our presents. But if when they grow a little older they take, take, take without return of any kind, if they look upon us as a kind of exhaustless cornucopia pouring out gifts for their delight, if they come to look upon these gifts as their right, with no sign of gratitude and no shadow of return, we reach the conclusion that these are selfish little brats, and in the depths of our arm-chair we brood silently over their ingratitude. In fact we plan an elaborate campaign to jolt them into a realization that Christmas is a time when the right hand accepts at

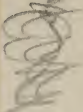
exactly the same time that the left hand gives.

Selfish people know dull and unacknowledged Christmas days.

Greedy people find the flow of gifts in their direction soon drying to a mere trickle. Sometimes families have been known optimistically to continue giving to the slightly bloated millionaire among their relatives. If they do, it is with a hope that when his will is read the score will eventually be evened up. The gifts are less gifts than thrifty investments.


PERHAPS all this sounds almost like a thumping of the obvious. Certainly it is the most primitive of human experiences to know that we get as we give. The earliest of philosophers must have learned this, and the race has never needed to unlearn the lessons.

Of course, you agree, we get what we give. When years ago some cynic defined gratitude as the anticipation of favors to come, he was sour but sane. To the generous we are inclined to be generous. Those that we know will remember us at Christ-



mas, we ourselves are sure to remember. We do not want to experience that shamed embarrassment which comes when we receive an elaborate and expensive gift from a friend to whom we have forgotten to send so much as a card.

When on Christmas Eve the family gathers to distribute presents, we should feel the outcast and outsider if we had none of our own to give when our turn came. So no matter how richly and lavishly we may have been remembered, Christmas joy would be dust and ashes in our mouth rather than on the hearth if we sat selfishly taking and taking and gave absolutely no sign of our love in some proportionate return. Yes; I confess this is basic platitude, human wisdom at its simplest.



**W**HY then do I write as I do? Once upon a time the most generous Father in all the world and the most lavish friend that a man could have, the benefactor beyond all others, the philanthropist who really loves the sons and daughters

of men, gave to His beloved a final crown for all His gifts.

In the past He had been generous beyond description.

He had given them, His children, His friends, a glorious house for their dwelling place. He had planted about it a garden of flowers, shaded it with giant trees, inhabited it with useful, friendly, graceful animals, filled it with songbirds. He had placed gold within easy reach and poured deep down into the earth the exhaustless resources of mines and wells.

He had clothed them in loveliest furs and softest silks, placed upon their fingers bright shining jewels and in their hair an endless variety of gems. He had filled their storehouse with all the varieties of food and given for their thirst a thousand delicious things that quenched and satisfied.

Best of all He had given them reason for even our cynic's gratitude. They could be grateful, His children, His friends, in anticipation of favors still to come.

FOR HE solemnly guaranteed that what He had already done was just prelude to what He meant to do. Someday they would discover that the house in which they now lived was, beautiful though they had found it, merely a dark passageway that led to the mansions of their eternal dwelling.

If they found the gardens of earth lovely, the flowers rich in color and heavy with perfume, someday they would know the delight of walking in the immortal gardens of Paradise. The gems they wore, painstakingly shaped stones and lovely if sickly and fickle pearls, would be replaced by the gems in an eternal crown of glory. The happiness that so often marked their brief present day would swell and expand into a rapture god-like and immortal.

Surely for all this they could, these recipients of His extravagant bounty, be deeply grateful.

THEN God reached the climax of His gifts.

He created Christmas. God raised the Star of Bethlehem. God sent His



angel choristers to sing the first Christmas carol.

God gave His only-begotten Son as the greatest of gifts to His children, to His friends.

With that first Christmas, He sent them Christ, the sweetest Babe that ever stretched out arms for love. God the Father had given the loveliest of the sons of God or men to be men's brother. God had sent them a leader to save them from the misleaders who had spoiled and fouled and bludgeoned their lives. He gave them a Savior to wipe away forever the record of their wrongdoing. He gave them the eternal Son of God to walk among them as their dearest companion and friend, to die among them, substitute for them upon the cross, to continue His mystical existence in the white Host of the altar.

All this and more than words can express came to us on that first Christmas Day.

FOR all this timeless riot of generosity, generosity that stretched from the dawn of creation to the

dawn of Christmas, God might have expected some grateful return.

In His divine wisdom He might rightly have looked forward to a display of at least that shrewd and worldly wisdom that we show toward rich friends and relatives on earth.

"After all," we might, in human fashion, fancy His saying, "it would be sheerest wisdom on their part to be grateful for what I have done. They might rightly reason thus: 'We cannot expect our Father to continue this lavish generosity unless we show some sort of return. Even the most generous person grows tired of showering largesse on people who snatch the gifts through the grudgingly opened door and never bother to send so much as a note of thanks.' The most unselfish person alive takes the hint after a time and argues: 'If I never get the sign of a gift in return, I am probably right to conclude that my gifts are not wanted'."

So God might justly have expected that if His children wanted Him to continue His generosity they would certainly open their own hearts. They simply couldn't take and take and

take without making an occasional gesture that said, "And this, dear Lord, is from us to you." They knew they couldn't get along very far without the gifts of their Father and friend. They had better be humanly provident, regardful of their own best interests, so that the Father's generosity wouldn't run dry.

Shrewdly, if crudely, it was the part of wisdom to prime the divine pump with a few return drops.

CERTAINLY if creation failed to excite men's generosity, Christmas seemed calculated to stimulate a perfect outburst of human gratitude. When the sons and daughters of God had knelt at Bethlehem's crib and seen how God had reached a summit of generosity in that depth of loving humility, when they knew that God had given His only-begotten Son that the world might be saved—we should normally expect to see them scurry around almost feverishly to find some gift to show that they appreciated God's gift of gifts.

Indeed Christmas time would seem to be the very moment at which we

human beings could take out the only adequate insurance for the continuance of God's generosity — our own pitifully inadequate but sincere gratitude to God and to Christ His Son.

THE more we think of God's goodness to us, the more embarrassed we become. Even when we give to God with all the generosity we can muster, we still give Him merely what He has already given us.

When in the ancient Temple of God's approved religion the ox and the lamb and the dove were sacrificed to God, priest and people were simply offering to the creator a trifling fragment out of His own vast creation. The very men and women of saintly lives who served God with sweat, blood, and tears knew that even the sweat, blood, and tears were first His gifts to them and that they were merely returning what was already His own.

And when in the most glorious gift of gratitude we offer to God the Mass, we give Him just His own. The bread of the offertory is made from the

wheat of His fields and with a skill He gave to human hands. The Eucharistic Son of God, whom we offer at the consecration, is already His beloved Son, His by the precious mystery of the Trinity and the Incarnation. Our own souls, which we offer to Him in our communions, came from His creative hand, are sustained by His providence, and will bear forever the image of His Fatherhood and the brand of His ownership.

**T**HIS is all, to our apparent discouragement, true.

Yet God, in a lovely kind of "let's pretend," has been willing to act as if it were not true. He takes the lamb of sacrifice with an almost humble gratitude. He accepts the labors and prayers and martyrdom of the saints as if all these were, not His own invention, but their unaided work. He stoops to receive the sacrifice of the Mass not merely from the hands of Christ, His divine Son and high priest, but from the human priest at the altar and from those copriests who kneel in the body of the church.

God, who is truly a Father, accepts from His children gifts, great or small,

as if they were man's own creation, the result of his own unaided labor.

Christmas then should be a time when we thank God for the gifts of the past and give to Him out of our hope for the gifts of the future.

**B**UT what of those millions who at Christmas, as throughout the year, give to God neither gratitude nor gifts in return for His generosity? What of those who use the pretext of Christmas in order to be generous with their relatives while they forget their Father in heaven and their brother in the crib?

What of those who providently assure themselves of gifts from others by carefully planning the presents they will give and yet make no slightest effort to continue the flow of God's gifts, wiping Him from their minds and blotting His name from their lists?

Happily for all of us, God will never cease to be generous even to His most ungrateful children. He will not snatch back the gifts He has given. He will not stop the flow of the gifts of the future.

Christ will continue to be reborn into an ungracious, unwelcoming world as long as there is a single Christmas altar erected to receive Him. Even though the vast majority of the world pays Him no slightest heed, ignores His gracious coming, turns away from His outstretched arms, and uses His birthday as excuse merely for lavish generosity to human friends and relatives, while they toss Him not even a casual "Thank you, sweet Jesus," Christ will yet give Himself for the life and the love of the world.

**I**N OUR deepest heart we despise ungrateful persons.

We hold warmly in our friendship those whose faces light in gratitude at the sight of our proffered gifts. They indeed are our friends who cap our presents with a swift, spontaneous, "And this is for you."

Yes we all grow very tired of anyone, however close and dear, who grasps our presents greedily yet tosses us hardly a thank-you and never a gift in return.

SHOULD we then be surprised if God too grows weary with the ungrateful and the selfish? Often it has seemed that people might well search their hearts to find out why it is that life suddenly goes wrong with them. Their enterprises fail. They lose friends. They seem no longer blessed. Fortune—that abstract goddess who is poor substitute for the providence of God—ceases to smile their way.

Perhaps we can measure our hope of God's generosity by the footrule of our gratitude to Him for the gifts we have received. If in the past we have thanked Him sincerely for His gifts, we are quite safe to expect more gifts to come. The grateful child is the child whom parents love to shower with presents. The ungracious child, surly, grasping, taking without thanking, accepting as if it were his due, giving in return neither smiling gratitude nor that love and affection which in parents' eyes are the greatest and most appreciated of gifts, that child can wear out even the most unselfish parent.

Perhaps God's ungrateful children



can in time wear out even His apparently tireless generosity.

CHRISTMAS is the time of spontaneous giving.

That we all know.

But we who are the followers of Christ born at the Christmastide know that our first gifts rightly must go to Him.

What can we give? What can we who owe everything to His generosity return as a sign of our gratitude?

How simple He has made our giving! We can offer Him the love of our hearts, the loyalty of our believing minds, the splendid services of our wills.

To the glory of His cause we can give the example of our Christian lives in a world that grows steadily more pre-Christian and pre-Christmas. We can give Him, who made the world and yet could find no birth-place on that first Christmas, the hospitality of our hearts in our Christmas communion. We can take Him, who waits endlessly in the tabernacle, back to the warm shelter of our homes.

We can give Him our charity to His poor. We can give Him the bright light of truth as we show it to those who still walk in the darkness that has not been penetrated by the Star shining over Bethlehem.

**G**OD has been sweetly generous to us all our lives.

Each year with the coming of Christmas it seems that God's generosity reaches new climaxes as He gives and gives to honor the birthday of His Son.

So if we are wise, we will give to Him that He may continue to give to us.

That is simple human wisdom.

We however are true sons and daughters of our bountiful Father, true brothers and sisters of the utterly unselfish Christ if we give to God because we love Him and because we are grateful beyond possibility of words for the glorious gift of His Incarnate Son.

This is the divine wisdom that has always marked the Christmas of the saints.



